

licence for life, would need to undergo periodic re-registration procedures after taking courses to update themselves on innovations in their fields. Medical students and residents in understaffed specialties would receive financial incentives.

But the committee also suggests that the wages of public sector physicians at each level should be linked with those of judges at various levels. Judges in Israel are very well paid and their annual increases are automatically linked to the full cost of inflation. Israel's medical association wants wage increases, but owing to the country's current severe economic recession, it was willing for rises to be gradual, said its chairman, Dr Yoram Blachar.

The committee also suggests that patients would be able to choose the senior public hospital doctors they preferred for consultation, surgery, and other invasive procedures instead of accepting the one who was on the duty roster. These physicians would not be allowed to have a private practice outside the hospital.

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich, *Jerusalem*

## US study shows 10-fold increase in autism over the past 20 years

Autism is about 10 times as common in the United States today as it was in the 1980s, concludes the largest epidemiological study of the condition yet to be carried out.

The study, conducted in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia, in 1996 found that 3.4 in every 1000 children aged 3 to 10 years had mild to severe autism, on the basis of a review of their medical records. Surveys before the mid-1980s had found that only 4 to 5 in every 10 000 children were affected. The researchers in the Atlanta study, from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suggested that some of the increase was the result of widened definitions of the disorder, but the explanation for the rest of the increase was unknown (*JAMA* 2003;289:49-55).

The definition of autism changed in 1994 to include milder forms of the disorder, such as Asperger's syndrome, in which children lack social skills but are often highly verbal.

Heightened awareness of the disease, and therefore greater propensity to diagnose it, could also have contributed to the increase observed in the Atlanta study. This is "due in large part to efforts of parent and advocacy groups, availability of more medical and educational resources, increased media coverage of affected children and families, and more training and information for physicians, psychologists and other service providers," the research group said. In 1991, the US Department of Education included autism as a category for special education services, which may also have increased diagnoses.

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

## Women are less likely than men to have rehabilitation after a heart attack

Men with hypertension are twice as likely as hypertensive women to have rehabilitation treatment after an acute coronary artery disease episode.

A new study, based on a random sample of 94 hospitals in the United Kingdom, indicates that male and female patients with the same health needs are not being treated equally.

"The notion that men and women may not be treated equitably arose from findings of gender differences in health care use and is explained in terms of the need for patients to conform to the gender norm for a disease," says a report of the study, in *Health Policy* (2003;63:63-72). "For coronary heart disease, the typical patient is male, and so, it is hypothesised, male cardiac patients are more likely to receive rehabilitation than female patients, especially if they also exhibit other risk factors typically associated with such patients."

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

## Being "tired of life" is not grounds for euthanasia

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

In a landmark decision the Dutch Supreme Court has ruled that doctors may not perform euthanasia or help with suicide unless the request comes from a patient suffering from a medically classifiable physical or psychiatric sickness or disorder. Simply being "tired of life" is no basis for doctors to act.

In what the media have branded the "tired of life case," the limits of euthanasia practice have been defined, after the case took two years to reach the highest court in the land. The decision has been welcomed by the Royal Dutch Medical Association for offering "clarity" in doctors' work. Voluntary euthanasia was decriminalised in the Netherlands in 2001.

GP Philip Sutorius, who had helped an 86 year old patient die in the belief that the patient was suffering unbearably because of his obsession with his physical decline and hopeless existence, was initially acquitted in 2000. But an Amsterdam appeal court found him guilty of assisted suicide, a criminal act, in 2001 (*BMJ* 2001;323:1384). However, the court imposed no punishment, recognising that he had acted out of great concern for his patient.

The Supreme Court has now dismissed his appeal against conviction, and the only legal option now for Dr Sutorius is an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, although there is no indication that the GP intends to pursue this.

In 1998 Dr Sutorius helped former senator Edward Brongersma to die, even though

he had no serious physical or mental illness. Mr Brongersma had often spoken with Sutorius of his wish to die. He suffered from physical decline and struggled with his "pointless and empty existence."

The appeal court had accepted the argument that Mr Brongersma's suffering was not medical and that GPs therefore had no experience to judge such an issue.

Dr Sutorius appealed to the Supreme Court in order to quash his conviction and clarify the position of doctors. The Supreme Court argued that last year's euthanasia law specifically did not cover such "tired of life situations." Its decision underlines the earlier judgment that "unbearable and hopeless suffering," a criterion laid down in the law on euthanasia, must be linked to a recognisable medical or psychiatric condition.

While agreeing with the legal decision, the Royal Dutch Medical Association points out that a general debate on how doctors should respond to requests such as Brongersma's has already begun. It argues that doctors continue to struggle with these "complex questions," which are often "in practice . . . a grey area."

The association has set up a committee to consider the issues and will report in the middle of 2003. Doctors and ethicists have already attacked the judgment, one branding it an "ugly historical mistake." GPs, they argue, treat patients every day whose complaints cannot be linked to a classifiable disorder. □



Anti-euthanasia demonstrators protest outside the Dutch parliament, April 2001